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ABSTRACT

Communication is an ongoing, dynamic process involving both transmitting and receiving verbal and nonverbal messages. To be fully functional, communication must include a feedback component that allows assessment of the effectiveness of the communication. Models of communication stress various relationships between senders and receivers, focusing on their attitudes, perceptions, and objectives. Other models address the factors affecting the ability of communicators to transmit meaning directly. The communication of a variety of information is vital to organizational success. Organizational communication systems have three components: the design of the formal communication subsystem, the organizational climate, and the interpersonal skills of those communicating. To understand an organization's communication fully, administrators must be aware of the needs, desires, and skills of the individuals making up the organization. Among the communciation skills individuals can develop are listening skills, listening behaviors, recognition of a listener's inability to assimilate additional information, skills in both small-group interaction management and public presentation, writing skills, and the ability to recognize indications that those receiving messages are not perceiving the intended meanings. (PGD)

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The New Mexico Research and Study Council adopted its Constitution on January 14, 1959, with sixteen public school districts, the State Department of Education, and the University of New Mexico becoming charter members. Today, the Council is fifty-six members strong, and is celebrating, during this 1983-84 school year, twenty-five years of educational service to New Mexico's youth.

The Council is an organization designed specifically to facilitate cooperative study and solution of educational concerns. Through the combined resources, assistance, and direction of members, the Council strives to improve and expand elementary and secondary education in New Mexico.

This publication represents the Council's first effort at celebrating this auspicious occasion, the Silver Anniversary Year of the New Mexico Research and Study Council.

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June 15, 1983

PREFACE

Six edifying and thoughtful expositive papers are being distributed to the educational administrators of New Mexico as one of several special Twenty-fifth Anniversary efforts of the New Mexico Research and Study Council. The personal and organizational topics and their approximate 1983 publication dates are as follows:

1. Understanding Organizational Patterns (April 15)
2. Characteristics of Effective Organizations (May 1)
3. Understanding Sources of Organizational Conflict And Conflict Management Strategies (May 15)
4. Time Management Techniques (June 1)
5. Maintaining Successful Communications (June 15)
6. Promoting The Organization (July 1)

We owe thanks to the American Association of School Administrators and its National Academy For School Executives for providing the impetus which led us to the development of this series of abstracts. The Council had initially hoped to participate in the Academy's July 1983 Colorado Springs seminar titled "Increasing Personal And Organizational Effectiveness", but when legislated school budget reductions made such an educational experience an impossibility for 1983, we utilized the Academy's seminar description as the basis for preparing these treatises.

The papers were initially researched and drafted by Bea Davis, a Council graduate assistant, as her primary assistantship assignment during the spring

semester of 1983. Bea and I "polished" the papers, and release them as Council publications envisioning that practicing school administrators will utilize them as useful self-education and staff-education conveyances.

Superintendents, after reading each treatise, are encouraged to have the six compendia placed in a three-ring binder or other easy-to-use professional library reference folder and to share the publications with subordinates and other key faculty and staff members.

Preparing papers for colleagues to read (and critique) is a weighty task. I appreciate the effort put forth by Bea Davis in encapsulating in a relatively brief set of papers an extensive, multifarious and utilitarian array of views, concepts, and principles applicable to the everyday thoughts and endeavors of both administrative theorists and practitioners.

Dr. Richard F. Tonigan

MAINTAINING SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATIONS

COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATION

Transmitting and receiving information clearly and effectively is a process considered central to successful leadership. But systematic research and study in the field of organizational communication is relatively new. As a new field of study, there are still considerable gaps in knowledge, and much of what has been learned has not been successfully incorporated into comprehensive, explanatory theory. Research has, however, provided some additional knowledge that can be helpful to leaders in developing their understanding of communication skills.

Effective communication is an ongoing and dynamic process. People learn through communication and use this knowledge to adapt to and manage their environments. Communication involves both transmitting and receiving messages both verbally and nonverbally. But to be fully functional, it also needs to include a feedback component which is deemed necessary for accurate evaluation of the effects of the message.

COMMUNICATION MODELS

Communication involves many complex components. As a result, a variety of models have been proposed in communication literature to help explain how it works. These models are theoretical attempts to comprehend both the components of the communication in process and their interrelationships. Some of the more popular models will be briefly reviewed in an effort to highlight several important aspects of communication.

One of the most widely accepted models was proposed by David K. Berlo (The Process of Communication, 1960). Berlo concentrates on four dimensions of the communication process: source, message, channel, and receiver. Within a particular exchange, these four components are viewed as significant elements governing the effectiveness of the sender's communication. The source (sender) of a given communication possesses skills, attitudes, knowledge, culture, and a social system that affects the sender's ability to communicate. The second significant dimension, the message, is comprised of its structure, as well as its various elements and both aspects influence transmittal ability. The channels of communication consist of the five senses, and the receiver shares the same personal dimensions as the source (skills, attitudes, etc.).

A second communication model, developed by R. V. Lesikar (Business Communication Theory and Practice, 1968) focuses primarily on the environmental aspects of communication. This model is concerned with the receiver's mental state, since only a small portion of sensory information is perceived at any given time. Lesikar is concerned with the differences in perception between people, even though they have participated in the same communication exchange.

Other models concentrate less on different aspects of communication behavior and more on the feelings of the participants in any given exchange. Purposes and objectives become associated with these communication exchange models, emphasizing that information by itself has no inherent meaning. Potential messages become meaningful as the receiver assigns meaning to them.

ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNICATION

Organizational survival is dependent upon communication. Communication

serves a variety of organizational functions such as the coordination and integration of many jobs. Another maintenance function includes the processing of informational inputs to allow the organization to be adaptive and responsive to changing conditions. Information orientation and dissemination are also valued functions of communication. The transmission of information about promotion, tenure, training, travel and educational advancement are examples of another important use of an organizational communication system. When information about personal growth opportunities are communicated, individual goals and organizational goals can overlap and be mutually beneficial. Another vital function of communication is in decision making, because better decisions can be made when they are based on the communication of accurate, comprehensive, up-to-date information.

ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

Three major elements of all communication systems within an organization have been identified in the research. These three elements are perceived to interact with one another in such a way as to determine the overall effectiveness of communication. The first element identified is the design of the formal subsystem. This design defines the way communication is expected to occur. This subsystem may or may not be in official, written form, but it refers to who is supposed to send what information to whom, and when. The subsystem is grounded in organizational structure and it reflects the chain of authority as well as other consciously developed communication links maintained by the organization.

The second element of organizational communication is the climate, or atmosphere established. Levels of trust, respect, and mutual support are reflected in the climate that exists within the organization. A closed communication climate generally exists in systems that harbor a lack of trust and support, whereas open communication is more likely to exist in organizations where honest, candid interaction is supported.

Interpersonal skills are the third component of an organizational communication system. The ability of participants to express themselves clearly, to be responsive and empathetic, and to listen carefully contribute to increased understanding and genuine communication. These skills, therefore, are a major contribution to the effectiveness of an organization. The quality of communication is determined by the general level of people's communication skills, including both their ability to transfer information and their understanding of messages received.

Each of these components affects the other two. The quality of each element determines the overall effectiveness of any organizational communication system. A well designed subsystem will tend to promote effective communication. Organizational climate influences people's attitudes and motivation levels. Predispositions toward active understanding and positive attitudes in general enhance communication. These three elements are not isolated, but rather interact in either supportive, constructive modes or in negative, undermining modes. Attention to each can enhance an administrator's effectiveness by providing feedback and knowledge necessary to smooth management.

THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

To understand organizational communication in any realistic way, administrators must also direct their attentions to the core element of all organizations -- individuals. An individual's communication activity is a primary part of behavior, and can be affected by reward systems, intergroup relations, organizational objectives, leadership styles and so forth. Effective managers strive to be aware of the predominant needs, wants, and desires of the participants, understanding that the organization's facility to correlate these motivations with organizational goals is to the benefit of the organization. Much of the satisfaction that people seek in organizations is actually achieved and experienced through their communication with others. Increased personal satisfaction is believed to influence willingness to communicate and, therefore, influences the effectiveness of the organization.

Communication skills possessed by each individual vary greatly. Message sending and receiving are communication skills that can be actively developed in an organization and this development is thought to stimulate the overall effectiveness of the system. Attention to this skill is a particular asset to administrators wishing to increase the effectiveness of an organization.

LISTENING SKILLS

Probably no skill in communication is more central than the ability to listen. Skillful listening includes much more than simply hearing. Effective listeners must focus on behavior, on nonverbal aspects of communication, and on recall. Listening includes organizing and synthesizing the information

received to interpret communication messages accurately. With the quantity and complexity of communication within an organization, listening skills developed as tools for organizing and recalling information can be highly constructive. Ralph G. Nichols in Do We Know How to Listen? Practical Helps in a Modern Age (1961) outlined strategies to use in the development of improved listening skills. Nichols' guide includes the following:

1) Find areas of agreement.
2) Judge content, not delivery.
3) Hold your fire (hear the speaker out before making an evaluation).
4) Listen for ideas.
5) Be flexible (adjust note taking techniques to situation, for example).
6) Work at listening (with full attention).
7) Resist distractions.
8) Exercise your mind (there are mind exercises to develop experience in handling difficult material).
9) Keep your mind open (bring objectivity to listening behaviors).
10) Capitalize on thought speed (thinking is faster than speech, so listeners should order their thoughts while others are talking).

In conjunction with the development of listening skills, administrators must also concentrate on the development of skills in listening behavior. Appearing actively involved in a communication exchange can be as important as actually listening. Displaying helpful interest, respect and acceptance are related to listening for understanding. Subordinates demonstrate

increased job satisfaction when supervisors practice active listening and display understanding. Techniques which can be used by a listener to demonstrate personal involvement in communication include making eye contact, facial expressions of interest, verbal encouragement (i.e., "Tell me more."), and positive body language (like nodding).

Information overload blocks effective listening. Effective administrators can guard against this development by skillful recognition of its symptoms. Humans can only process a limited amount of new information at one time. Overload produces three common behaviors, including hostility, withdrawal, and tension. When these behaviors are recognized, input overload should be suspected as a possible cause.

SENDING MESSAGES

An administrator can only be effective when the ability to send messages skillfully has also been developed. Three types of message-sending skills that are particularly important to an administrator's effectiveness are dyadic, presentational, and writing skills, because they are so routinely a part of job expectations.

Dyadic skills enable an administrator to interact effectively in smaller groups of two or three. Conducting a job interview would be a primary example of this type of interaction. Abilities to develop for conducting skillful interviews would include the ability to put the other person at ease, the ability to conduct the interview in a systematic, controlled fashion, the ability to ask insightful, penetrating questions, and the ability to verbally

summarize the interaction for mutual understanding.

A second message sending skill to develop as an administrator is the ability to conduct clear, informative public presentations. Attention should be directed toward the content of the presentation, the makeup of the audience, the knowledge and background of the audience, the style of delivery, and the clarity of the ideas. Public presentations should be organized with the needs and expectations of the audience as a guide to determining content and preparing delivery.

A third, particularly important administrative skill to develop is the ability to write effectively. Attention to a clear, straightforward, and concise style contributes to better communication. Good writing assists understanding within an organization and contributes to effective public relations as well.

PERCEPTION

Perceptual skills are also widely varied, and are often a primary source of communication conflict and breakdown within an organization. Researchers have identified three of the most common errors in perception. Awareness of these errors can assist administrators in communication skill development. As managers increase their understanding of how perceptual skills can work, they can hopefully develop better skills themselves.

Human beings have a natural tendency to maintain a state of psychological balance, which often causes them to see only what they want to see. This process in perception is called "selectivity." A stimulus that creates

disequalibrium is often suppressed or ignored or denied. In an organization this process can cause considerable conflict, as different factions perceive different aspects of the same situation, and believe they perceive correctly. Selectivity should be identified whenever possible in situations of communication failure.

A second common cause of perceptual error is stereotyping. Predetermined evaluations and role expectations prevent individuals from objectively observing one another. This error can create major breakdowns in organizational communication, as barriers to understanding get erected because preconceived ideas interfere with accurate perception.

A third communication block based on perceptual error is called abstracting. Abstracting is an inferential process in which people fail to distinguish between what they think and what they know. Collections of abstractions about a situation are perceived to be truth, rather than presumptions or inferences. By appreciating that different people look at things in different ways, administrators can better understand how disagreements might arise, and hopefully this awareness will enable them to work more effectively.